

ABC WORLD NEWS TONIGHT
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6:30 P.M.

The Pelton Case and the Press

JENNINGS: The Reagan Administration is on the attack against the news media once again. This time the focus is on reports about the accused spy Ronald Pelton and secrets that he allegedly shared with the Soviet Union.

As ABC's Jim Wooten reports, this time the pressure on the news media is coming directly from the Oval Office.

JIM WOOTEN: Monday morning. NBC News says Pelton sold the KGB vital information about:

JAMES POLK: A project with the code name Ivy Bells, believed to be a top secret underwater eavesdropping operation by American submarines inside Russian harbors.

WOOTEN: Monday afternoon. CIA Director William Casey recommends that NBC be criminally prosecuted for its report. Mr. Casey previously wanted five other news organizations prosecuted for publishing U.S. intercepts of Libyan cables, but the Justice Department declined because a 1950 statute has never been used against the press.

But this case may be different. The White House confirmed today that the President himself had personally warned Washington Post owner Katharine Graham a few days ago that any publication of the story NBC broadcast yesterday would force the government to prosecute. So far, the Post has withheld publication and comment.

If Pelton did tell the Soviets about Operation Ivy Bells, intelligence gathering by U.S. submarines within their own ports, that capability, at least, couldn't have come as much of a surprise in Moscow. The New York Times described it precisely 11 years ago. And just last year this book offered even more detail.

Moreover, even before the NBC broadcast, the Sunday editions of the Chicago Tribune had already made reference by name to the secret intelligence project.

With all that leakage, past and present, Senator Patrick thinks Mr. Casey's probably going after the wrong people.

SEN. LEAHY: If you prosecute the press, you're prosecuting the symptoms, not the problem. Go after the people who are doing the leaking. That's where our real problem is.

WOOTEN: But Mr. Casey seems deadly serious about taking NBC to court, and anybody else who reports the existence of Operation Ivy Bells.

The Justice Department is still unenthusiastic about prosecution. But with the President now in the CIA Director's corner, that could very well change.

AS RECEIVED